



March 8, 2022

Senate Finance Committee
TESTIMONY – FAVORABLE W/AMENDMENTS
SB 781 – Public Safety and Behavioral Health Improvement Act

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 78,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports SB 781, Public Safety and Behavioral Health Improvement Act with the amendments suggested below. Strengthening the Maryland Behavioral Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence and the Governor’s Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services would help reduce our reliance on the criminal justice system to address behavioral health concerns. BHSB shares this goal and recommends the following amendments to avoid any unintended consequences.

Amendment No. 1

- Beginning on page 2, strike lines 22 through page 3 line 3, in their entirety.

BHSB strongly supports peer support services and peer support specialists. We fund services and programs throughout Baltimore City that employ these critical professionals and applaud efforts to expand their use in the public behavioral health system. We worry that the direction provided in this subtitle, however, is duplicative with already existing procedures and may cause confusion regarding the process to certify peer support specialists.

Amendment No. 2

- Beginning on page 4, strike lines 23 through page 6 line 18, in their entirety

Behavioral health screening and assessments for substance use disorder are key components of our behavioral health and broader health care system. The state has made great strides in integrating SBIRT (Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment) into our system of care and BHSB supports ongoing efforts to further integrate screening into all programs. The new grant program under this subsection would duplicate these efforts, many of which can currently be funded with a federal match through Medicaid.

BHSB is most concerned with the appropriateness of establishing a statewide system of outcome measurement for the effectiveness and adequacy of behavioral health crisis response services under this grant program. Such a system should be developed by the Behavioral Health Administration with significant stakeholder input and remain associated with the behavioral health crisis response system itself, rather than an unrelated grant program.

Amendment No. 3

- Beginning on page 7, strike lines 5 through 8, and replace with the following:
 2. **BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CRISIS RESPONSE SERVICES**
 3. **PROCEDURES TO TRIAGE AND MAKE APPROPRIATE DISPATCH DECISIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS SUFFERING AN ACUTE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CRISIS**

BHSB supports efforts to provide additional training on behavioral health conditions to public safety answering point personnel. They play a key role in keeping those experiencing behavioral health crises safe and in dispatching appropriate services. We offer the amendment above to be more precise about the specific systems and procedures that personnel need to be trained on to effectively respond to callers experiencing behavioral health crises.

BHSB supports the intent of this bill and recognizes the importance of improving collaboration between the public safety and behavioral health systems. We think SB 781 can help advance those efforts with the above amendments. **We ask for a favorable report for SB 781 with the amendments above.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142